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EDITORS' TABLE.

EDITORS: A. S. PACKARD, JR., AND E. D. COPE.

—— The International Geological Congress and the Zoölogical Society of France have recently adopted rules for the regulation of nomenclature in the systematic biological sciences. These resemble, in most respects, those previously adopted by the British and American Associations for the Advancement of Science. After reading them, we wish to signify our approval of them, with one slight modification in each.

The gist of the whole matter lies in the interpretation of the law of priority. The above-mentioned rules all agree that priority rests on definition, both for generic and specific names, but the rules of the congress and of the zoölogical society add some conditions which we wish to note. The rules of the former body say (p. 121): "For specific names priority shall not be irrevocably acquired until the species shall have been not only described but figured." Our objections to this doctrine have been fully set forth in an editorial in the July NATURALIST. They are two. The first is, that anything which may be taken as a substitute for a characteristic and analytical description is objectionable. Intelligent and intelligible descriptions are more needed than figures, and they are entitled to especial recognition when they are produced. Second, illustration is not always within the reach of naturalists, especially out of Europe. We do not wish, however, to be understood as detracting from the importance of iconography.

The rules of the zoölogical society say: "The name used for each genus and each species can be no other than that by which it was first designated, on condition: *a*. That it shall have been issued in a publication where it shall have been clearly and sufficiently defined; and *b*, that the author employs the binominal nomenclature." Our criticism is here directed against the language "clearly and sufficiently defined." While insisting on description as a basis of nomenclature, we cannot be very exacting as to the quality of the description. "Sufficiently" described, that is without defect or excess, is a perfection which few specific or generic descriptions can present in that stage of a science in which they first appear. This requirement is impracticable. "Clearly" defined these groups can and should be, although the diagnosis may be imperfect, but who is to decide when the degree of clearness is sufficient to satisfy this rule? This requirement also cannot be carried into practice, however much we may desire the reverse were true. Nothing remains but that we accept any description and diagnosis, and when these fall below the standard set by our French colleagues, let the critic and reviewer use their best endeavors that such defects be made as odious as possible.

In the Proceedings of the U. S. National Museum, Professor Gill insists on the adoption of a generic name proposed by himself without description, in preference to a name proposed later, by another author, whose description contains some errors. The opposite course had been pursued by Professors Jordan and Gilbert, a circumstance which gives rise to the criticism in question. Professor Gill admits the facts to be as above stated, and thereupon makes the following remarks: "What is the advantage of any description? According to the rules of the British and American Associations for the Advancement of Science, a description is necessary as the basis of permanent nomenclature, but like many of the other rules propounded in those codes, there is no proper logical basis therefor." Professor Gill then proceeds to make the usual statements about the inadequacy of the earlier generic descriptions, etc., a mode of reasoning generally resorted to under similar circumstances.

In taking his position, it is evident that Professor Gill and his school (for he is not alone in his views) have to contend not only with the wisdom of the American and British Associations, but with that of the other bodies above mentioned. It would seem superfluous for us to defend a fortification so strongly held, but the heresy in question has had considerable run in America, and it is fitting that said linen should be washed where it has been soiled.

In brief then, one reason why a description is necessary in adding a new name to scientific nomenclature, is, that science is science and not literature, a distinction occasionally lost sight of by a few writers on natural history. In other words, it deals with things, and not words, and the only connection words have with science, is to represent things. As this cannot be done without a preliminary definition, names alone *(nomina nuda)* do not belong to science at all, but to the arts of composition and literature. Second; the inconvenience of the substitution of literary methods for scientific methods in scientific work, is so great, that scientists have felt compelled to protect themselves against these "literary fellows." By insisting on definitions, these gentlemen are placed in a somewhat embarrassing position. They do not wish to forego the pleasure of creating a new lexicon, but to compose a diagnosis is for them a very serious business. Literature, a critic says, deals with "manner," while science treats of "matter," and a diagnosis is a concentrated extract of matter. Between the two horns of the dilemma he will generally (not always we are sorry to say) prefer the less conspicuous course, and abandon nomenclature as a profession.